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TERROR FINANCE, WOMEN'S POLITICAL RIGHTS
SUBJECT: CODEL ROS-LEHTINEN ENGAGES KUWAITIS ON IRAQ, IRAN,
TERRORIST FINANCING, AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

REF: STATE 2860

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a January 20-21 visit to Kuwait, CODEL Ros-Lehtinen met with Kuwaiti officials to offer condolences on the death of Amir Shaykh Jaber Al-Sabah, and to express USG appreciation for Kuwaiti support for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and for Kuwait's \$500 million pledge to hurricane Katrina relief. The delegation also had the opportunity to hear from Kuwaitis on Iraq, Iran, terrorism financing, and women's political rights. The delegation was accompanied by a reporter/producer from C-SPAN who was recording a two-hour, "reality-style" special on the trip to be aired "six to seven times" in February.

¶2. (SBU) Summary continued: Dr. Nasser Al-Sane, a moderate Islamist member of Parliament (MP), told the delegation "Iraqi Sunni leaders were not optimistic" and had complained during a recent visit to Kuwait of being excluded from the political process. In a separate meeting, Kuwaiti Ambassador to the U.S. Shaykh Salem Al-Abdullah told the delegation that "failure (in Iraq) was a matter of life or death" for Kuwait, and cautioned against letting a timetable dictate the Iraqi political process. Shaykh Salem said the Government of Kuwait (GOK) was also "extremely worried" about Iran's nuclear program, though he focused on the potential for negative environmental impacts rather than on security concerns. The delegation also met with a group of women activists to discuss women's rights in Kuwait and the likely impact of the female vote in the 2007 parliamentary elections. The women were pessimistic about female candidates' chances of being elected, but expressed optimism about the long-term impact of women's participation in Kuwaiti politics. The event was covered by Arabic-daily Al-Watan in its January 22 issue. The Ambassador stressed the importance of programs to promote study in the U.S. during a dinner with the delegation. End summary.

CODEL Ros-Lehtinen Participants

¶3. (U) The delegation was led by U.S. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Chairwoman of the House International Relations Committee Subcommittee on the Middle East and Asia. Accompanying the Chairwoman were U.S. Congressman Todd Russell Platts (R-PA), U.S. Congressman Stephen P. Lynch (D-MA), and U.S. Congressman Jim Gerlach (R-PA).

Success in Iraq "A Matter of Life or Death" for Kuwait

¶4. (SBU) Dr. Nasser Al-Sane, a moderate Islamist member of Parliament (MP) affiliated with the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), told the delegation he had met with "Iraqi

Sunni leaders," in town to offer condolences on the death of Amir Shaykh Jaber Al-Sabah, who had insisted they wanted to work within the democratic system, but were "not at all optimistic" about the potential for political compromise among Iraq's diverse ethnic and confessional groups. According to Al-Sane, Iraqi Sunnis "recognized their mistake" in boycotting the January 2005 elections, but felt marginalized by Shi'a domination of political power and feared Iranian influence among Iraqi Shi'a groups. Al-Sane himself claimed Iran was more influential in Iraq than the U.S.

15. (SBU) Kuwaiti Ambassador to the U.S. Shaykh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah stressed that "failure in Iraq is not an option," during a separate meeting to receive the delegation's condolences to the Al-Sabah family on the death of Amir Shaykh Jaber Al-Sabah. "Your success in Iraq is a matter of life and death for us. Failure would be a global catastrophe," he said. Emphasizing that the U.S. "is on - and should stay on - the right political and security track," Shaykh Salem cautioned the Representatives from letting a timetable dictate the political process. He argued that internal divisions were a greater threat to Iraq and, subsequently, the region than "foreign fighters."

16. (SBU) Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen asked if "failure was not an option," then why was the GCC not more supportive of Iraqi reconstruction efforts. Shaykh Salem noted Kuwait's support for post-Saddam Iraq, including lobbying for Iraq's re-inclusion in the Arab League, but said security was a necessary precondition for reconstruction efforts. He assured the delegation that the GCC collectively would be heavily involved in assistance projects once the security situation stabilized.

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"Extremely Worried" About Iran's Nuclear Program

17. (SBU) Asked about the GOK's views on Iran's nuclear program, Shaykh Salem said that, regardless of Iranian intentions, "we are extremely worried" about the possibility of an accident at the Bushehr nuclear facility, echoing the GOK's commonly heard proclivity to approach the nuclear issue from an environmental rather than a security standpoint. He said Bushehr was only 120 miles from Kuwait compared to 800 miles from Tehran and was situated on a fault line. Shaykh Salem stressed that "the diplomatic track should be exhausted" before any other decision was taken. "The U.S. and Kuwait see eye-to-eye on this issue," he said, noting that there had been a "convergence of views" during the Vice President's recent visit to Kuwait.

Islamic Charities Unfairly Targeted?

18. (SBU) Al-Sane complained that some Islamic charity organizations, like the Kuwait-based Social Reform Society (SRS), the charity arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, were unfairly designated as financiers of terrorism and prevented from charitable work because fund raising activities were limited by strict regulations. He asked the Representatives to review the procedures for the designations and regulations. Al-Sane stressed that SRS was a purely charitable organization and assured the delegation that he had personally overseen an inspection of the organization's finances, which proved there were no terrorist connections. Al-Sane said he had raised the issue with the Treasury Department during a trip to Washington in 2005, but complained he had not received a reply from Treasury. The Representatives promised to follow up on the issue with Treasury officials. Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen noted that some charity organizations do divert funds to terrorist organizations and that restrictions on certain fundraising activities can unfortunately have an adverse affect on

legitimate charities.

Women's Activists Not Optimistic About 2007 Elections

¶9. (SBU) Fifteen of Kuwait's leading women activists, including several who intend to run in the 2007 parliamentary elections, participated in a lively roundtable discussion with the delegation on women's political rights in Kuwait and speculated on the likely impact of the female vote. While agreeing that Kuwaiti women were subject to discrimination, the women activists disagreed on whether general social attitudes or the political influence of Islamists was more to blame. Dr. Nibal Al-Boursly, a professor at Kuwait University, stressed the difference between religious conservatism and the politicization of religion, which she believed was the real problem. Dr. Rola Dashti, an outspoken activist and a candidate in the 2007 elections, also argued that gender discrimination in Kuwait was linked to politics. Dashti claimed women's salaries were 30% less than men's and 80% of unemployed Kuwaitis were women.

¶10. (SBU) Most of the women agreed that a reduction in the number of electoral districts from 25 to 10, or even fewer, would greatly increase female candidates' chances of being elected. Dr. Farida Al-Habib, a prominent cardiologist, argued that without a reduction women would not be elected to Parliament in 2007. The majority of the activists believed the female vote would benefit Islamist groups, and predicted women would not be elected in the 2007 parliamentary elections. Some, however, were more optimistic. Dashti predicted 70% of registered women would vote, 12 female candidates would run for election, and three would be elected.

¶11. (U) The women also eulogized the late Amir Shaykh Jaber's contribution to women's rights. Congressman Platts stressed that the way women could honor the late Amir was to exercise the political rights Shaykh Jaber had fought so hard to help them obtain. One of attendees, Aisha Al-Rasheed, wrote a long article on the event that was published in the January 22 edition of the Arabic-daily Al-Watan.

¶12. (U) In a separate meeting with the delegation, Jassem Al-Boodai, the Editor-in-Chief of Al-Rai Al-Rai, a liberal Arabic-daily with wide distribution in the Gulf and Lebanon, echoed the women activists' concerns, arguing that Islamists groups would benefit most from the female vote. He also

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questioned the USG's commitment to promoting political and economic reform in the region. The Representatives emphasized the USG's willingness to partner with domestic groups to promote democratic reforms, but stressed that democratic change must come from within. Due to the current leadership controversy, the newspaper has not yet published an article on the meeting.

Ambassador Encourages Hill Support for Study in the U.S.

¶13. (SBU) During a dinner with the delegation, the Ambassador noted the declining number of Kuwaiti students studying at American universities and stressed the importance of Congressional support for student exchange programs. He also emphasized the need for more efforts to engage and integrate foreign exchange students into university campuses, noting these students will be the next generation of leaders in the Middle East. Public Affairs Counselor stressed the need for support for Fulbright and other educational scholarship programs to encourage foreign students to study in the U.S. She also highlighted the success of Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)-funded programs and emphasized the importance of additional funding.

¶14. (U) The Representatives did not have the opportunity to clear on this cable.

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